# THOSE CURSED ESSEXIAN PLAINS

*By L.S. Dell*

" *Her soyle composeth hath; so are th'Essexian lands,*
*Adjoyning to the same, that sit by Isis side,*
*Which London over-lookes: but as she waxeth wide,*
*So Essex in her Tydes, her deepe-growne Marshes drownds,*
*And to Inclosures cuts her drier upland grounds,*
*Which lately woody were, whilst men those woods did prize* "

Extract from Song 23, from Volume 2 of
Poly-Oberion (1645)
By Michael Drayton

" *May those already cursed Essexian plains,*
*Where hasty death and pining sickness reigns,*
*Prove all a desert! and none there make stay,*
*But savage beasts, or men as wild as they!* "

Extract from Upon the Death of my
Lady Rich, from Workes (1645)
By Edmund Waller

*Copt Hall Marsh, Blackwater Estuary, 2025*

# *I. Introduction*

I'm writing to you now from the middle of a marsh. And yes, I mean the literal middle, as one of my legs is currently stuck up to the knee in clay mud, and I cannot move it at all.

How did this come to be? I don't even like the outdoors!

Well, in 2003, Country Life Magazine ran a survey, ranking 36 of Britain's ceremonial counties on a variety of factors: crime, property prices, cost of living, schools, and their natural beauty.

Essex came 30th overall.

It was the only county to be awarded zero points for its landscape.
It obviously wasn't going to be very high up, not when competing against the moors of Yorkshire, the lakes of Cumbria, or the beaches of Cornwall. But dead last?

And yet, Essex has one of the longest coastlines of any county in the UK – some 350 miles. But, it isn't as neat and tidy as Cornwall's. Instead, it is ripped to pieces by creeks, marshes, and more islands than anywhere else in the country, like a letter coming in your door that the dog gets to first. 'Essex has the most torn and untidy coast,' wrote historian William Anderson in 1949. 'It is in shreds and patches from the Thames to the Stour … creeks and marshes, the lovely islands and treacherous mudbanks, give it a character that attracts some and repels others.'

This polarising coastline of floodplains and swamps likens Essex further to its spiritual twin – New Jersey in the US. Like Essex, Jersey is built on marshland, and is considered a cheap place, serving mainly as a commuter state for New York City, filled with people with funny accents who have been lampooned on reality television for as long as Essex. Similar disdain can be found elsewhere in the world for their respective swampy communities – the Mississippi Delta in the US, Kerala in India, or the Pontine Marshes in Italy. All of them looked down on from the high horse of the inland inhabitants, all of them laughed at by the rest of their countries.

Despite the majority of the marshes being drained with the help of Dutch immigrants in the 17th century, the battle between land and sea rages on to this day. The North Sea Flood of 1953 killed 304 people in England, 120 of which were in Essex. As Essex Record Office's archivist and chronicler Hilda Grieve wrote, "the conflict is perennial – claim and reclaim, challenge and counter-

*Old Hall Marsh, Tolleshunt D'Arcy, 2025*

*Arlseford Creek, Colchester, 2025*

wrote, "the conflict is perennial – claim and reclaim, challenge and counter-challenge". The Essex people were forced to live on land that was deemed by many inlanders as unfit for humans, but they made do, wrestling their homes away from nature herself.

Flooding and marshland were not the only issues for the coastal dwellers, however. They had to fight off continual plagues of what they called 'ague' – which we today know as malaria. The idea of malaria existing in England can seem preposterous to us modern folk, however, it hung like a dark cloud over Essex's coast for hundreds of years, with cases still being recorded late into the latter half of the 19th century. The 'ague' claimed thousands of lives a year. The spread of disease led to many of Essex's marshland dwellers to turn superstitious. Up until the 1800s, Essex had many witch doctors, known as a "cunning man". There were stories of great serpents, black dogs, witches, and thousands more.

So, can I see anything strange in these marshes, the likes of which have seen vast flooding, witch hunts, malaria outbreaks, and ghost stories, as I sit here in the mud?

No, I haven't seen a thing. No snake has come to eat me, but my trousers are ruined, my welly might be lost forever, and I'm alone in the middle of no-where.

I've become one with the marsh, not in a kind of Buddhist way, but a literal way, as I am still very much stuck. But, that gives me a unique viewpoint on this desolate place. Some could call it a wasteland, but I would call it beautiful. The same way that a desert can be beautiful, or the Arctic – it's got a beautiful sense of vast peace, the kind of place that makes you feel small.

The clay itself stinks, filled with black spots of oil, and the strong smell of salt. I should know, as I walk out of the marsh as half man, half pottery, no dignity.

After a half mile walk back to the car, surrounded with the stink of oily salt and the stench of self-pity, I wash myself off with a dog towel, and drive home shirtless. So, if you want to see these beautifully desolate vistas for yourself – bring a friend.

Or a wetsuit.

*Arlseford Creek, Colchester, 2025*

# *II. Mythology*

## THE GREAT WORM

Long ago, when the marshes stretched for miles rather than metres, there was said to be a great worm, a serpent, that lived among the reeds. It was oily black in colour, and gargantuan in size, half in the water, and half upon the land. It brought with it a plague of the ague to the people of the marshes. Where the worm passed, the ground turned sour and barren. The livestock turned sickly. The pools were glazed over with rotting fish. The birdsong ceased.

The local people did not hunt for the serpent, for the marsh belonged to it. They marked its paths through the flattened reeds, and avoided them. In later years, when the men grew bold, they cut into the marshes. They raised its banks against the sea, draining the pools. As the water retreated, the marshland shrunk. The land dried, and the worm was seen no more. Some say it perished when the water left, but no carcass was ever found. Others say it retreated to deeper waters.

The ague lingered for a while after the Great Worm left, beaten back with modern medicine. But the land of the serpent remained barren to mankind, and few dared to build there.

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*Like a lot of folklore from around the world, this story of the Great Worm carries with it a moral. Unlike many stories of monsters lurking near villages – there is no hero in the original oral tale. No knight comes to slay the serpent, because it is not something to be fought, rather it is something to be endured and eventually engineered away. The serpent represented all of the issues with marsh life – the spread of malaria, poisoned water, livestock disease. But most of all, it represents land that refuses settlement, an expression of the tension between mankind and hostile barren landscapes. The symbol of a large serpent in British folklore is also commonplace – there's the 'fen worms' of Norfolk and Suffolk, the 'marsh dragons' of Lincolnshire, or the 'bog serpent' of Cambridgeshire. All of these iterations also have no hero, there is no literal battle with the leviathans – but represent something mankind must learn to live with.*

Illustration from *The Flying Serpent, or Strange News out of Essex* (1669)

## THE BLACK SHUCK

Those who travelled the marsh roads late at night spoke of a great black dog who walked without sound. It was larger than any breed man had ever concocted, with a rough wicker-like coat. Those who saw it described it as blacker than the night which surrounded it – more like an absence of anything than a material creature, black hole-like in appearance. Some said its eyes shone like embers in the night; others said it had only one.

The Shuck didn't run, for it was never in any hurry. It would appear suddenly, manifesting out of the night itself, standing in the road, or pacing silently ahead. No man could ever pass it by, no matter how hastily he strode after it, for it always remained effortlessly ahead. Those who followed, soon fell ill. Those who turned back, would sprint away.

It is said that the Black Shuck did not lead the man, but that it led forth Death himself. It could be the travellers, or a fellow villager, or one of their livestock.

The great black dog never left tracks, nor ever ventured from the road. It belonged to the road, and the road belonged to it. When the dawn cracked across the land, the Black Shuck was nowhere to be seen.

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*The Black Shuck is a tale first seriously documented in 1577, in the pamphlet "A Straunge And Terrible Wunder, Wrought Very Late In The Parish Church Of Bongay" by Abraham Fleming. The Shuck is featured in folklore across East Anglia as a whole, with small local variations as to how violent it is, or certain specifics about its appearance. The Black Shuck is an embodiment of uncertainty, and one of death being foretold by omens, which was commonplace in 16th century England. Like the Great Worm, the Shuck is not something to be fought, and there is no hero to the story. But, unlike the serpent, the Shuck never disappeared. It is still allegedly seen to this day, continuing to roam the East Anglian coastal areas.*

Illustration from *A Straunge And Terrible Wunder, Wrought Very Late In The Parish Church Of Bongay* (1577)

## THE WITCH OF THE REEDS

In the low tide and thick fog of the Essex marshlands, people spoke of a woman who appeared at dusk. Her hair matted with reeds, her face drawn and hollow. Her skin a sickly nicotine-tinged colour, her clothes drenched in mud. She stood in the pools of the marsh, by the edge of the creeks, with pale eyes cutting through the air.

Those who lingered by the water too long would hear her lament. Those who dared to approach her would be clutched at by the reeds. Livestock nearby turned uneasy. Children playing in the marsh were found in a catatonic tremble in the tall grasses.

The old said she was once a villager there – widowed and shunned by the community, a pariah. Over time, she became a part of the place itself, an extension of the marsh. She would stay on the edges of the marsh, unable to leave it. The Witch of the Reeds, whispering to the passers-by.

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*The Witch of the Reeds, or The Marsh Hag, isn't traceable to a text like the Black Shuck. Rather, it emerges from a network of oral tradition. In the original story, the Hag is not a witch – she has no cat and broomstick. Instead, she is a manifestation of the marsh itself – a force of nature rather than a manifestation of evil in the Christian moral framework. In the 16th century, the story took on a different meaning. Starting with trials at Chelmsford in 1566, over 300 people, the vast majority of who were women, were tried for witchcraft in Essex between 1566-1675. 129 were convicted, and 74 were hanged, with a further 36 dying in prison. Essex was the most notorious area of Britain for witchtrials, with more people being accused and tried than in any other county, as well as the most deaths.*

*What we can tell from these stories, is that Essex folklore is less about drama or moral lessons than about atmosphere and place. The Great Worm, the Black Shuck, the Will-o'-the-Wisp, and the Marsh Hag are not just stories, but markers of anxiety tied to the landscape. Their power lies not in action but in presence. They appear in the in-betweens – liminal spaces like marshes, roads, tidal creeks - and reflect the fears of people living alongside unpredictable land and uncertain neighbours.*

Illustration from *'The Apprehension and Confession of Three Notorious Witches Arraigned and by Justice Condemned and Executed at Chelmsford'* (1589)

*None of these figures are defeated. The Great Worm turns the land itself into a threat, while the Black Shuck haunts roads and boundaries as a warning of death or misfortune. The Will-o'-the-Wisp misleads the unwary through marshes, appearing almost familiar yet betraying travellers' expectations. The Marsh Hag, rooted in suspicion of isolated women, transforms social fear into a fear of the land itself, blurring human and environmental danger.*

*What ties them all together is liminality. They inhabit thresholds - between village and marsh, between land and water, between human understanding and the supernatural. Their reflect how Essex people understood danger - embedded in a location, rather than imposed by villainy. They are signals, rather than characters.*

*Essex folklore thus creates a world where danger cannot always be confronted or overcome. The stories endure because they resonate with real risks, social tension, and the shifting edges of the Essex landscape – a landscape which is still in a state of continual unrest. They are not something to be fought, but something to be endured. They demand a respect – a respect for the land, for nature itself.*

*Copt Hall Marsh, Blackwater Estuary, 2025*

## *III. Ecology*

The Essex marshes stretch along the edges of the county where rivers widen and begin to lose their names, where solid ground melts and slips into water. Shaped by tide, silt, and long human intervention, they are never fixed. Twice a day the sea advances and retreats, flooding creeks and hollows before pulling back again, leaving behind glistening mud, shallow pools, and exposed channels. The marsh is not stable ground. It is made and unmade continually, a place that resists certainty and refuses permanence.

These estuaries—Blackwater, Crouch, Roach, Colne, Thames—are wide, slow-moving systems where freshwater and saltwater mix. Their waters carry sediment from inland and from the North Sea, depositing it across the marsh in thin layers. Over time, this material builds land, but only briefly. Storm surges, high tides, and erosion can undo decades of accumulation in a single night. The marsh exists on borrowed time, constantly negotiating its own survival.

Closest to the tidal channels, only the hardiest plants survive. Glasswort and cordgrass grow low and dense, their roots gripping soft ground that would otherwise be washed away. These pioneer species slow the movement of water and trap sediment carried in by the tide, gradually raising the surface of the marsh. Sea lavender, thrift, and sea purslane follow, spreading colour across the flats in late summer. What looks sparse at first glance is densely occupied, each plant adapted to salt, wind, and flooding. Together, they perform quiet, essential work, binding soil, softening wave energy, and creating shelter for insects, juvenile fish, and crustaceans that move in and out with the tide.

Further inland, where flooding is less frequent, the vegetation thickens. Reeds form tall, dense beds along ditches and creeks, their stems filtering water, trapping debris, and breaking the wind. Rushes and coarse grasses dominate the grazing marshes, growing in soils heavy with water and nutrients. These areas have been shaped by centuries of drainage, embankment building, and grazing. Cattle and sheep keep the grass short, maintaining open ground for birds. These are working landscapes as much as natural ones, dependent on regular upkeep. Without cutting, grazing, and dredging, the marsh would quickly change character, closing in or flooding entirely.

The marsh is loud with birds, especially at dawn and dusk. As the tide falls, wading species move across the mud in scattered lines, probing for worms, molluscs, and small crustaceans exposed in the sediment. Curlews, redshank, avocets, and dunlin rely on these narrow feeding windows, timed precisely to

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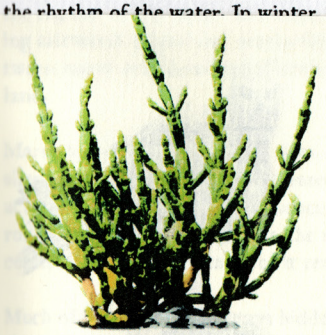

*Glasswort*
*Salicornia Europaea*

*Golden Samphire*
*Inula Crithmoides*

*Seablite*
*Suaeda Maritama*

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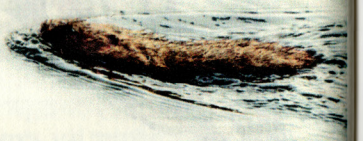
*Marsh Harrier*
*Circus Aeruginosus*



*Water Vole*
*Arvicola Amphibius*

*Lapwing*
*Vanellus Vanellus*

the rhythm of the water. In winter, brent geese arrive in large numbers, grazing saltmarsh plants and nearby fields. Lapwings and oystercatchers move between marsh and farmland, blurring the boundary between wild and worked land.

Marsh harriers glide low and slow over the reeds, their flight deliberate and silent. In colder months, short-eared owls hunt by day, pale shapes drifting across open ground. Their presence depends on the health of the marsh below: rodents in the grass, insects in the soil, water in the ditches. Everything is connected, even when most of it remains unseen.

Much of the marsh's life stays hidden. Water voles slip through reed-lined channels, feeding on bankside plants. Otters move quietly along tidal creeks and rivers, often at night, leaving little trace beyond tracks pressed into mud. Fish use the flooded marsh as nursery ground, moving into shallow water on high tides to feed and shelter before retreating again. Insects are everywhere—mosquitoes, flies, beetles, dragonflies—emerging in vast numbers in summer, rising from water and vegetation in clouds, transferring energy from plants into the wider food web.

Despite its richness, the marsh is fragile. Sea-level rise, erosion, and changing land use place increasing pressure on these environments. Sea walls crack, channels shift, and land can be lost quickly if the balance tips too far.

In winter, high tides spread further across the land, washing nutrients into the soil and filling creeks and hollows that stay dry in summer. The surface looks quiet, but the mud remains active, full of worms and small creatures working below ground. In warmer months, shallow pools shrink and grow saltier, turning harsh and reflective under the sun. Life adjusts rather than disappears: algae bloom, insects gather, and the air thickens with movement.

The Essex marsh is neither land nor sea, but a shifting threshold between the two. It is productive, watchful, and uncertain. Its changes are often slow, but they are relentless. This is a place that rewards attention and punishes carelessness, where danger is rarely obvious. What looks like land will turn liquid with a single footstep. It is not difficult to see why stories gather here, or why the marsh has long been imagined as a place where things appear, vanish, and refuse to stay still. This crackled earth, this shredded quilt of clay and land, this jigsaw of Essex land - long overlooked for its ecology, its ability to absorb and store carbon dioxide, and its beauty. This desolate wasteland.

*Copt Hall Marsh, Blackwater Estuary, 2025*

*Old Hall Marsh, Tolleshunt D'Arcy, 2025*

## *About the Author*

L. S. Dell is an artist, writer and photographer from Essex. His work has spanned from sculptural forms to hand-drawn animation, from 35mm photography to embroidery. Receiving his Diploma in Arts from Suffolk New College, he is currently studying for his BA in Fine Art at Central Saint Martin's College, University of the Arts London.

Produced 2026

@l.s.dell

https://lsdell.myportfolio.com

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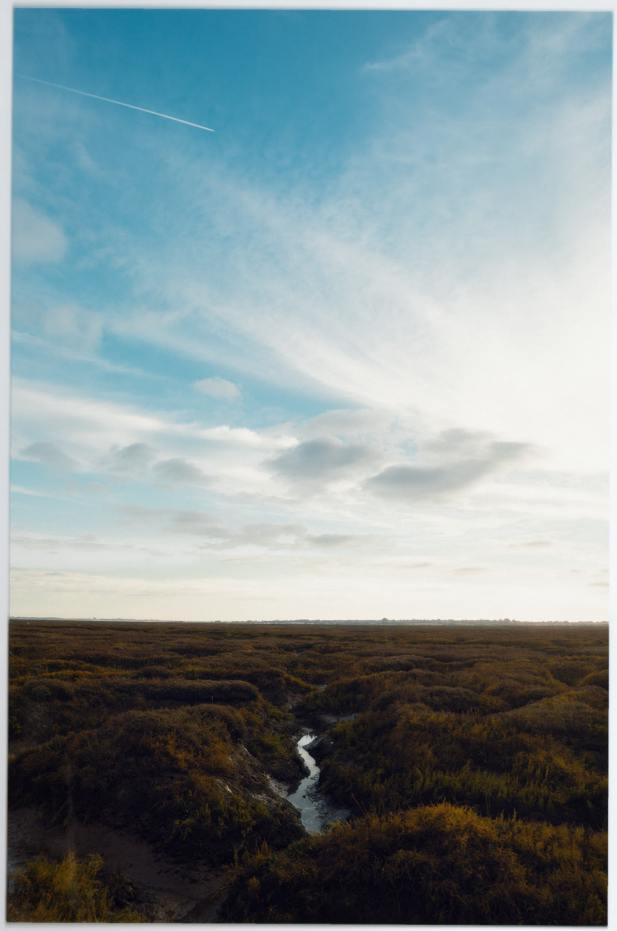

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